SERIAL STORY

The Sable Lorcha

BY

Horace Hazeltine

SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head later removed by means of a string practiced by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait nailed to a tree, where it was had been used as a target. Clyde pardons Evelyn to secrecy. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Philetus Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a ride from Cameron's lodgekeeper. Clyde makes an effort to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the bowl of an opium pipe under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead next morning. While visiting Cameron in his dressing room a Noll Gwynn mirror is mysteriously shattered.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

For just a moment Cameron stared in dumb awe. When he turned to me he appeared suddenly to have aged. His eyes were lustreless, and his cheeks wore a gray pallor.

"My God!" he murmured in a kind of breathless whisper.

I would have given a great deal to have been able to allay that terror of the impalpable which was gripping him. But I was helpless. Shocked and astounded, myself, solace was not at my command. More to escape the piteous appeal of his silent gaze than in hope of making discovery, I turned in haste to one of the long windows which opened on the outer balcony. Drawing back the sashes and flinging them wide, I stepped outside and, listening, bent over the railing.

But the night was strangely still. There was no sound, even, of stirring leaves. A brooding hush seemed spread over all the outdoor world—that ominous silence which often precedes the breaking of a storm. I looked up to find the heavens wrapped in a pall of inky cloud. And then, with a feeling of having fled from a lesser to a greater evil, I returned to the lighted room, and closed the window to shut out the horror of the night.

Cameron was standing where I had left him. He looked woefully tired and haggard.

"Explain it!" he cried, hoarsely. "My God, Clyde, explain it!"

"I would to Heaven I could," was my forlorn reply.

CHAPTER VII.

"From Sight of Men Into Torment."

Seldom have I passed a more miserable hour than that which followed upon the seeming phenomenon I have described. Cameron was nervously in tatters and my own poise was something more than threatened. The sight of a usually brave, strong, self-contained person of stolidly phlegmatic temperament transformed into a relaxed, nerveless, apprehensive creature is enough of itself to try one's fortitude, even with the most favorable collateral conditions. And the collateral conditions here were quite the reverse. That which had affected Cameron had exerted an influence upon me as well, knowing, as I did, all the circumstances, and being interested as I was, in my friend's problem. And so while his plight tore at my heartstrings, my own inability to grapple with the mystery contributed an added mental distress.

To my dismay I found Cameron quite incapable of anything approaching a calm, common-sense discussion of the matter, and realized to the full the mischief which this last performance, coming as a climax upon a week of more or less disquietude, had effected.

He sat most of the time with head bent forward and knees doubled, his toes touching the floor but his heels raised and in constant vibrating movement, as though stricken with palsy. The fingers of one hand toyed incessantly, too, with the fingers of the other, in a variety of twisting, snakelike involutions. In vain I endeavored to arouse him; to stir in him a spirit of retaliation. Some one was playing tricks upon him, and that some one must be discovered and brought to justice. Common sense told me that, however mysterious these happenings appeared, they could not have occurred without human agency. It was our task to discover the agent and punish him. This was my line of argument; but through it all, Cameron sat unmoved and unresponsive.

And then there came to me again, that unwelcome suspicion that all along he had been hiding something from me; that he divined the cause and the source of the persecution, but for some reason of his own would not divulge them.

I rang for one of the footmen and had some brandy brought, and forced Cameron to swallow a stiff drink of it, in which I joined him. But even this stimulant had small effect upon him. And when, finally, I reluctantly bade him good-night, I was overwhelmed by the pathos of his condition. So wrought and tortured, indeed, was I, by the sad picture of dethroned courage which followed me home, that sleep fled me and left me wide-eyed until the dawn.

The tidings which came to me with my coffee that morning were more than half expected. Cameron was ill, and his physician had been summoned from New York.

When I reached Cragholt the doctor had come and gone, and a trained nurse was in attendance. Evelyn, meeting me in the hall, conveyed this intelligence in a breath, and then, laying hold upon me, a slender hand upon each coat sleeve, her big eyes pleading and anxious, she ran on:

"It is shock, Dr. Massey says. Deferred shock, he called it. He says Uncle Robert has suffered from some sudden grief, fright, or other dreadful mental impression. His temperature is way below normal and his pulse is a sort of rapid feeble flutter. Oh, do tell me what you know about it. What shock has he had? You were with him last evening. He was gay enough when you and he went from the music room. What happened afterward?"

Caressingly I rested my palms upon her shoulders.

"My dear little girl," I said, soothingly. "I am sorry I can't satisfy your very natural curiosity."

"But it isn't curiosity," she corrected, promptly. "It's interest."

"Well, interest then. I'm sorry, I say. Something did happen; but to tell you just what it was, and why it was a shock to him, I am not able. Not now, at least. Maybe, some day, you'll know all about it."

There never was a more reasonable young person than Evelyn Grayson. Most girls, I fancy, would have teased and grown peevish at being denied. But she seemed to understand.

"Do you want to see uncle?" she asked me.

"I don't believe it would be wise," I answered. "Probably I, being a reminder, might do him harm. Tell me how he seems? He isn't unconscious?"

"No. He answers questions. But he never says anything for himself. And, Philip, he looks so pinched and old and pale! And his hands are so cold. The nurse has taken away his pillows and raised his feet, and—it's gruesome, that's the only word that describes it."

"But he'll soon be better? The doctor said that, didn't he?"

"Yes. He said that."

But the reaction which usually follows shock was only partial in Cameron's case, and for days his life was in danger. Then followed a period of slow, general recovery.

As the month of October progressed I feared the liability to relapse. I knew, instinctively, with what dread sensations he must be awaiting the fourteenth of the month. He had been forbidden, of course, to receive any mail, just as he had been denied visitors; but I felt that in an uncertainty that must of necessity prove injurious. And so I took Dr. Massey, in a measure, into my confidence, and gained from him permission to see Cameron for a brief moment.

"He has been asking for you," the physician informed me, "but I fancied it better to make no exceptions. Now, however, I see that you may be a help instead of a hindrance."

Despite the more or less circumstantial reports as to his condition and appearance which had filtered to me from the sick room, through the medium of Evelyn, Miss Collins, the nurse, and Dr. Massey and his assistant, Dr. Thorne, I was not altogether prepared for the marked change which less than three weeks had wrought in my friend. He was peaked and bloodless and tired and old. And his voice was little more than a whisper.

He made a brave effort to smile, as I came in, but it resulted in a sad grimacing failure. I lifted one of his thin, clammy hands which lay inert on the coverlid, but it gave me only the feeblest answering pressure.

"I'm so glad you're better," I told him, cheerily. "Fancy the doctor allowing me to see you! That shows what he thinks."

"Yes," he whispered, "I'm coming round, slowly. And I wanted to see you, Clyde. What day of the month is this?"

"The twelfth."

"Day after tomorrow, it will come," he said.

"Don't be too sure," I replied. "I think they've done about enough to satisfy any ordinary villains."

He was silent for a moment. Then, with just the faintest turn of his head from side to side, he said:

"But they are not ordinary villains."

"Well," I said, "if it does come, I shall find out how it got here; and that will be a step towards bringing them to justice."

"You'll find out?" he queried, incredulously.

"Yes. I'll get your mail that day, myself. I'll tell that monument of pomposity, your butler, Mr. Checkabeedy, that I am to see every letter that comes to the house and know how and by whom it is delivered. Letters can't get here without hands, you know."

"Other things seem to be done without hands," was his conclusive comment; and I had no reply for him.

Concerning Murphy and the murdered Chinaman, Cameron did not ask, and I was glad he did not. For Murphy had been discharged from custody, for lack of evidence; and though there were some desultory efforts making to place the blame for the Celestial's violent taking-off, I doubted that they would have practicable result.

The precautions against surprise on the fourteenth, which I had outlined so briefly to Cameron, I carried out with added detail. For instance, I instructed Romney to report to me every person who passed in or out of the gates guarded by his Lodge. I had Kilgour, the superintendent of the Cameron acres, issue similar orders to his men concerning any strangers seen on the estate that day. And, finally, when not fetching the mail from the post office, myself—and four times I made the trip—I sat on guard in Cameron's study, waiting and expectant.

But the day passed, it seemed, without the looked-for incident. Every letter, by post or by hand, which came that day, inside the Cragholt limits was by me personally inspected, and amongst them all there was no one which bore the faintest resemblance to those two baleful missives of the two preceding fourteenths.

When I had made my last trip to the post office, finished my final inspection, and was almost jubilant over the significant cessation of the threats which, in their ultimate fulfilment at least, had brought my friend so close to dissolution, I made haste to carry to Cameron the glad news.

Oddly enough, his condition in the past forty-eight hours had materially improved, and as Dr. Massey attributed this, in part at least, to the influence exerted by my brief visit, I was now permitted to repeat the treatment at pleasure.

It wanted but a few minutes of eight o'clock, and Checkabeedy seized the occasion to inform me, as I passed through the hall, that dinner had been waiting for nearly a half-hour; a fact which I knew quite as well as he, but when I had chosen to disregard in favor of more pressing and important employment. Nevertheless I had dressed before going for the last mail, and as a moment would suffice to assure Cameron that all was well I relieved the mind of the distressed butler, by assuring him that dinner should not wait over five minutes longer, so far as I was concerned.

A very light tap on the chamber door was answered by Miss Collins, who came out into the passage and closed the door behind her.

"I fear it is not advisable for you to see him, now, Mr. Clyde," she said. "He has suddenly had a return of some of his worst symptoms, and I am sure Dr. Massey would object to his being at all excited."

"But I shan't excite him," I explained. "I have the very best of news for him. It is his anxiety over a certain matter, no doubt, which has brought about the symptoms you speak of. I know I can relieve his mind, which I have reason to believe has been all day under an unusual strain."

But still this efficient-looking, white-clad woman was not wholly convinced.

"It must be only for a minute then," she finally allowed. "You can go in alone. But at the end of sixty seconds," she added, as she glanced at the little gold watch she wore pinned to her spotless waist, "I shall interrupt you; and then you must leave."

Yielding, perforce, to her condition, I entered. And as I did so, Cameron half rose on his elbow, regarding me with what I thought was anxiety for my report.

"It's all right," I said, quietly. "All right. Not so much as a line from the enemy. They have withdrawn, just as I—"

But he interrupted me.

"Here, quick!" he was saying. "Take this!" And I saw then that one hand was drawing something from beneath his pillow. The next moment he had given me a long envelope of that thin, waxy texture I had learned to loathe.

For a heartbeat I stood appalled, transfixed.

"Quick!" he insisted, excitedly. "Open it! Read it! She'll not leave us long and I must know its contents."

"But how—" I began, as I tore the end of the envelope.

"God knows," he answered, before I had put my question into words. "I had been dozing; about an hour ago I stretched out my hand, unconsciously, and that lay beneath it, on the counterpane. It crackled as I touched it, and I knew then, even before I recognized the feel of it."

Sixty seconds! Was there ever such an interminable period? Sixty long seconds before that door would open with the interruption that would spare me. I fumbled with the devilish paper; let it slip through my fingers; tore a bit here and a bit there; finished the tearing; and then, disembling, began tearing the other end. And still the seconds lagged; still the door remained stationary.

"My God, Clyde!" Cameron cried, in a frenzy of impatience. "What's the matter with you tonight? Are you never going to get that thing open?"

And then I, desperate, too, with eyes fixed imploringly on the door, was about to answer him with the truth—that I did not want to open it; that I would not, could not read the contents; that he must wait and trust me, absolutely—when, quite without design on my part, the envelope fell to the rug at my feet. And as I stooped to recover it, I heard the doorknob turn.

When I regained the upright, Miss Collins was entering, and the letter was in the pocket of my dinner jacket.

"And so you see, Cameron," I said, speaking distinctly and with double purpose, the nurse being in ear-shot, "everything is quite right. The matter you spoke of shall be attended to, at once, and I'll report to you, tonight—before ten o'clock, surely."

The reproach in his eyes stung me, and the pain of it followed me from the room and stabbed me at intervals during dinner. And yet it was not the part of sanity to have acted otherwise than I did. The temptation had occurred to me to invent phrases and sentences expressive of satisfaction over the effort of the previous communications. But I doubted that, in my agitation, I should be successful in the deception. And so, my only course had been delay—stupid, bungling, palpable delay it was, I suppose, but after all it had served; and, though it left Cameron in doubt, it gave me time and opportunity to arrange some plan for extracting the fangs of this epistolary adder before it could strike its prey.

Purposely I delayed reading the letter, myself, until after I had dined. I chose uncertainty as to its contents as less likely noticeably to affect my demeanor than an exact knowledge of the minatory message which I felt sure it carried.

I think I fancied I should be able to conceal my real state of mind. Certainly I willed to do so. But I was very soon conscious that Evelyn had divined my dissimulation. Her eyes became suddenly grave and questioning, her laughter quieted, and her conversation, which had been glad and gay, relapsed abruptly into the serious. When the coffee and liqueurs had been brought on, Mrs. Lancaster asked to be excused, and left us alone together.

There followed then a moment of silence between us, while I selected a cigarette and lighted it. She had edged her chair a little closer to me—she was sitting on my right, as usual—and leaned forward, her slender but divinely rounded forearms extended across the shining damask of the tablecloth.

As I dropped my match upon the tiny silver tray which the inimitable Checkabeedy had placed conveniently at my elbow I turned to her and saw her question in her imploring gaze and attitude even before she voiced it.

"Tell me!" was what she said. And although I knew that she would demand it I was unprepared. To gain time rather than information I bade her be more explicit.

"Everything," she pursued, inclusively, with a peremptory emphasis which indicated her determination not to be denied.

My hesitation resulted in some amplification on her part. She was impatient as well as resolved, and resented what she interpreted as my reluctance to gratify her.

"Everything," she repeated. "Everything that you have been hiding from me from the first. I am entitled to know. What about the head that was cut from the portrait? What was it that caused the shocks which brought on Uncle Robert's illness? Why did you go for the mail four times today, and sit all the rest of the time in Uncle Robert's study? What has happened to make him worse this afternoon? What is troubling you, now? I'm not a child, I'm a woman, and I refuse to be kept in ignorance any longer."

She was glorious as she thus formulated her demands, her cheeks blazing, her eyes brilliant, her voice a crescendo. She must have seen my admiration. Certainly I made no attempt to hide it; and before she had quite finished I had possessed myself of her clasped hands, and was bestowing upon them an applauding pressure.

And her argument prevailed. She knew too much not to know more. Cameron's wishes in the matter could no longer be regarded. Just how tactfully I managed the disclosure, it is not for me to judge. Perhaps I told more than I should. Possibly I revealed too little. I was guided solely by the wish not to alarm her unduly. And yet, as nearly every feature of the affair was of necessity alarming, it became a vexing problem as to what to include and what to omit.

Eventually she heard the whole story, every phase of it. And so it is not altogether clear in my memory how much I conveyed that night and how much was left for me to add ten days later.

There is no question, however, regarding that third letter which had been so mysteriously received that day. I drew it from the envelope, there, at the table, and we read it together, by the light of the pink-shaded candles; our chairs touching and her cool little left hand clasped hard in my sinewy right.

As I spread the sheet that sinister appearing black daub at the bottom smote me with a sense of ill as acutely poignant as a rapier thrust, and the heavy, regular, upright chirography, with its odd f's and p's, so awesomely familiar, was scarcely less disturbing.

Silently the girl and I ran through the dozen lines.

Like its two predecessors the letter began with the sentence:

"That which you have wrought shall in turn be wrought upon you."

No longer could this be regarded as idle boasting. It had become an edict of grave significance. And what followed only emphasized the proven force behind this series of singular communications.

"All having been performed as foretold, our power is demonstrated."

Then, simply, almost crudely, but of horrid poignancy, ran the words:

"Know then, that before the morning of the Eighth Day hence, as passed the face from the portrait, as passed the reflection from the mirror, so you, physically, will pass from sight of men into torment."

As I read my breath caught in my throat and my pulses paused. Evelyn pressed closer to my side, and I felt her shiver as with cold. The final words, solemn, admonitory, priestlike, were these:

"Say not Heaven is high above! Heaven ascends and descends about our deeds, daily inspecting us, wheresoever we are."

Instantly she turned to me, and I saw there were tears on her cheeks, and that her long dark lashes were wet.

"You cannot tell him this, Philip," she said, her voice low but unfaltering.

"No," I replied, "I cannot tell him. In his present condition, it might be fatal."

"And now he must get well," she declared, with decision. "He must be well enough in a few days to be moved. He shall not stop in this house any longer. He shall go where he can be protected, and these fiends, whoever they are, cannot, or will not dare to follow."

As she spoke an inspiration came to me.

"The yacht," I said.

Impulsively she laid hold upon my arm, in a way she had.

"The Sibylla," she agreed, delightedly. "Of course. It will do everything for him."

"But what am I to tell him about this?" I asked, in perplexity.

For a second she was thoughtful.

"We couldn't imitate the writing, could we?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," I answered. "We could. I think I'd even guarantee to reproduce that hideous black thing, but—"

"But what?"

"We can't imitate the paper. The paper is as characteristic as any of the other features, if not indeed more so. And he knows that paper."

"Then you must just lie to him," she decided. "You must tell him the envelope was empty; and you must make him believe it."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Maine's Greatest Crop.

The total sale of the Aroostook potato crop of 1911 is estimated at between 14,000,000 and 15,000,000 bushels, leaving betwen 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 bushels that were sent to the starch factories, used for seed and food purposes here in the country or lost. It is figured that for crops sold the average price was over $2 a barrel.

This means that Aroostook received for the crop of potatoes which it raised in 1911 between $1,650,000 and $1,800,000. The exceptionally good year has encouraged the farmers, and their plans show that there will be no shrinkage of the acreage this season. It will not be increased, however, to any appreciable extent. Most of the Aroostook farmers believe that the time has come to stop increasing the acreage and to devote themselves to the problem of securing further increase of the yield an acre.